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SUBJECT: FORMER JOURNALIST LIKELY TO HEAD FMLN TICKET IN
2009 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

¶1. (U) Local Salvadoran media reports that the FMLN has announced that journalist Mauricio Funes will head the party's presidential ticket in the 2009 election. Salvador Sanchez Ceren, former FMLN General Coordinator and currently FMLN head of faction in the National Assembly, will be the party's VP candidate. It is not clear yet if Funes has formally accepted the FMLN nomination.

¶2. (SBU) This announcement represents an acceleration of the timetable Funes outlined to Polcouns on September 19, when he emphatically declared that he was not yet a candidate. He expected the nomination process to last until November or December 2007, though it was clear that he saw himself becoming the FMLN's candidate. Media reports from September 19 announced that Funes would end his TV program at the end of the month. Funes told us he felt this was premature, as he was not yet a candidate, but he agreed it would be untenable to be both a journalist and candidate. He said he felt as if the journalist period of his life was coming to a close and another phase was opening.

¶3. (SBU) Funes made clear to us that he would not accept the FMLN's nomination if he would be merely a figurehead candidate who, if elected, would not enjoy the ability to lead the GOES. He did not articulate what would convince him that his conditions were met. Funes said that his campaign would include a reevaluation of CAFTA-DR and dollarization, though he made clear that he did not necessarily mean El Salvador would be leaving that free trade agreement. Funes said both these issues would be evaluated in terms of El Salvador's national interests.

¶4. (SBU) Funes was accompanied by his wife Wanda Pignato, who initially came to El Salvador as a representative of Brazil's Workers Party and several years later became cultural attaché at the Brazilian Embassy in San Salvador. Funes noted that during his recent visit to Brazil, her position facilitated his meeting with Brazilian President Lula da Silva.

¶5. (U) Our meeting with Funes was cordial. He stated that he hoped to have closer contact with the U.S. Embassy and seemed intent on cultivating future contact with us. He said that, if he were elected, U.S.-Salvadoran relations would go forward on the basis of mutual respect, which suggested to us that he sees the current relationship as a one-sided affair.

¶6. (SBU) Comment: U.S. relations with a Funes government would be a far cry from the close relationship we enjoy with the Saca government, and there can be no doubt that an FMLN-led government -- whether headed by Funes or not -- will pursue policies at odds with our interests in El Salvador and throughout Central America.

¶7. (SBU) Comment continued: The FMLN's selection of Salvador Sanchez Ceren as Vice Presidential candidate will be an

interesting test for Funes. A former guerrilla commander, Sanchez Ceren is considered to be amongst the hardest of Marxist hard-liners still standing in the FMLN. We find it difficult to believe that Sanchez Ceren, who went to war in an effort to establish a revolutionary government in El Salvador, would actually surrender leadership of the FMLN, let alone real executive power, to a journalist turned politico. Moreover, it is unlikely that Funes, at the top of the ticket, will be able to overcome the clear link to the FMLN's hard-line, unreconstructed past as represented by Sanchez Ceren. This nomination suggests to us that the FMLN is not likely to give Funes the freedom to govern that he says he will require.

Glazer